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Fiction, Reality, Dulleses

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 23 — At 90 years of age, Eleanor Lansing Dulles, a Washington fixture who has written 14 books on economics and international affairs, is turning her hand to fiction.

Miss Dulles is polishing the final draft of a mystery novel filled with murder and intrigue, using as background some of the things she saw and experienced as an economic specialist for the State Department and as the sister of Allen W. Dulles, the Director of Central Intelligence in the Kennedy Administration, and John Foster Dulles, who served as Secretary of State in the Eisenhower Administration.

But when it comes to elaborating on the plot of her new work, she is as adept at keeping a secret as any agent who ever worked for her brother Allen.

She will say little more than that the yarn, set in the mid-1970's, begins with a murder on Duck Island, the Lake Ontario summer place of John Foster Dulles, then takes her male protagonists (from the Pentagon and Commerce Department) and the heroine (an "older woman" who works at the State Department) to the United Nations, Washington, D.C., East Germany and Gettysburg, Pa.

"But there are no C.I.A. moles," she said, trying to head off predictable speculation. "Nobody who reads my book is going to find out much about the intelligence community."

Despite her age, Miss Dulles remains energetic and spry, although she suffers a bit of deafness. Besides working on her novel, for example, she had lunch this week with the Mayor of Berlin; next week she will have an interview with the BBC. "And the phone is always ringing," she said. "Sometimes it's Japan, sometimes Austria. I never know who will call next."

Then there are the talks she is asked to give plus the luncheons and the invitations to travel to Germany, a country she knows intimately as a result of having headed the State Department's Berlin desk in the post-World War II reconstruction. She is also working on a project to set up some lectures to memorialize her brother John, whose 100th birthday anniversary will fall in 1988.

When it comes to writing a novel, Miss Dulles can consult her own

muse, for much of her life has been the stuff of fiction.

Her grandfather John W. Foster and her uncle Robert Lansing both served as Secretary of State. "In our family we were imbued with the thought of public service," Miss Dulles said.

She first arrived in Washington in 1901, "the year Queen Victoria died," she noted, and subsequently spent 28 years at the State Department as an economic specialist, winning numerous accolades before retiring in 1962.

In World War I she worked with refugees on the Marne; a generation later she witnessed the workers' riots in East Berlin in 1953 when Russian

flags were torn down and burned. In the early 1960's, she traveled to more than 40 countries in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, making studies for the State Department's Office of Intelligence and Research.

She was so well known in Germany in the years after World War II that the East Germans accused her of instigating the "spy" tunnel built from Berlin's American sector to tap the telephone system in East Berlin.

"I didn't," she said with a shake of her head, "but I was involved quite a bit with those people who helped the Allies during the war."

Real life, says this grandmother of six who assumed her maiden name

after the death of her young husband many years ago, is often stranger than fiction.

"Yes, I think it really is," she said. "Real life is very bewildering, and astonishing and breathtaking and unpredictable."

Miss Dulles was married in 1932 to David Simon Blondheim, a philologist, who died two years later, after the couple had had two children.

A devotee of the detective stories of Dick Francis, Rex Stout and John D. MacDonald, Miss Dulles is now pecking away at her novel on an electric typewriter in a book-lined bedroom. The main problem with writing fiction as opposed to nonfiction, she says she has found, is that one has to be careful about "the time schedule."

"In a nonfiction book you go to the Almanac to get your dates," she explained. "But in a novel you've got to remember that he went to the U.N. on a Friday and Saturday was the day he was kidnapped."

Besides the novel and the economic books, she has written an autobiography and "John Foster Dulles: The Last Year."

As for the "older woman" who works at the State Department in her novel, Miss Dulles finally confided: "There are two very attractive men and they both want to marry her — I think some people will think it is me."

And is it?

"Not really," she answered. "But I'd say she was a friend of mine."